

RIOTS AND POTLACHES



A NEIL KEATING READER

RIOTS AND POTLACHES
A NEIL KEATING READER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

RIOTING & LOOTING: AS A MODERN-DAY
FORM OF POTLATCH

P.5

A GAME FOR THE NINETIES: ASÆ

P.12

WHAT IS A RACE?

P.16

OUTWITTING THE STATE TAKES A
DIFFERENT KIND OF POWER

P.19

Rioting & Looting: As a Modern-Day Form of Potlatch

A specter haunts the modern world. It is the specter of the gift. Everywhere the fight goes on, to get people to respect property, and to accept the miseries that come with such respect, such as work, destitution, and injustice. It is an endless fight by necessity. The minute it ceases, or weakens (e.g., gets caught on videotape), people break out into activities of an altogether different nature. They riot, and they loot. They relieve things of their fixed commodity values. The redistribution of these relieved things does not take the form of a sale, nor even a trade. Without a fixed price, they can only be considered as gifts.

Many societies throughout the world practiced their entire economic activities along the lines of gift-exchanges, the most famous of which is the potlatch. As the modern societies continue to approach total collapse, we see an interesting trend developing. Potlatching is making a comeback! This was recently demonstrated in 1992 in South-Central Los Angeles, when more than twelve-thousand people took to the streets to express themselves through the destruction of great amounts of accumulated wealth.

Dan Cranmer's Potlatch

Around Christmas in 1921, a Nimkish Kwakiutl fellow named Dan Cranmer hosted a six-day potlatch at Village Island, near Alert Bay in the Canadian province of British Columbia. The occasion was that of his marriage. Cranmer, being true to his Kwakiutl traditions, planned to celebrate the event with a long feast during which he would give everyone gifts. Some three-hundred guests (fellow Kwakiutls) were on hand to witness and receive Cranmer's giving away of all his accumulated wealth.

Cranmer reportedly started out on the first day by receiving much of this wealth from his wife's family (like a dowry). That night there was a dance. The next day he gave away twenty-four canoes, pool tables for two chiefs, four gasoline boats, and another pool table. He gave away blankets, gaslights, violins and guitars, kitchen utensils and three-hundred trunks. Women were given bracelets, shawls and dresses. Sweaters and shirts were given to youngsters, and coins were thrown in the air for children to collect. Another dance was held afterwards. He did not remember what he did on the third day (perhaps he was in a swoon). During the fourth day he gave away sewing machines, gramophones, bedsteads, and bureaus, along with more boxes and trunks. On the fifth day he gave away cash. And on the sixth he gave away about 1000 sacks of flour, each worth three dollars (a lot of money in 1921), as well as some sugar. It was one of the largest potlatches on record.

Although it sounds like a good time for everyone, Cranmer's potlatch was in fact against the law, and he, along with fifty other Kwakiutls, had criminal charges brought against them as a result. Twenty-two of those people were imprisoned for two months, and the rest were given suspended sentences on the condition that they surrender all their potlatch gear, which included dance masks, ceremonial whistles, and plaques of beaten copper (known as "coppers").

The law Cranmer had violated is known as Canada's Indian Act of 1885, which specifically made any potlatching illegal. The reasoning behind this act was produced by a typical blend of missionary and governmental rationales which had as their goal the assimilation of Aboriginals into modern society, and the extinction of their cultures. The motives behind these goals were hardly just misguided altruism. In reality, The Canadian government (as did the American government) was seeking the absolute extension of the rule of property. Potlatching was a threat to this rule because among other things, potlatching was an economic system of distribution that followed along communal lines. It took commodities and turned them into gifts, thus mocking the entire system of capitalist production. Potlatch destroys property. It is the old story of the "lazy Indian," the one who is indolent and thriftless. The big project was figuring out how to get these people to work. Forcing practices of private property on them seemed the obvious choice. Potlatching was perceived by Canadian legislators as a "mania," an "insane exuberance of generosity" that had to be stopped. Cranmer might as well have gone a-looting.

The Nature of Potlatch

Potlatching is but one form of an economic system that is based not on barter or sale, but is based on compulsory gift-giving. We now know that various forms of the gift economy existed all over the world.

Most of the Aboriginal tribes living along the Northwest Pacific coast of North America potlatched. Formally speaking, a potlatch was a gathering of people on any number of occasions, including birth, puberty, marriage or death. During these gatherings there would be feasting, dancing, and the redistribution of property or its destruction.

In these societies, children were raised with the idea of the gift firmly implanted in their worldview. For example, Franz Boas observed that when a Kwakiutl child is born, it is first given the name of the birthplace, which it keeps for about a year. Then a relative of the child gives a paddle or a mat to each of the clan members to mark the occasion of his second name. When a boy reaches puberty, he takes his third name, by distributing gifts to everyone in his clan. It is in effect, his first potlatch. He is usually assisted in this ceremony by relatives, especially the nobility.

During the bigger potlatches, the Yaoks and the Maxwas, property would be distributed by the host to his guests in between the dancing and the feasting. This was the general mechanism by which he acquired rank and status within his society. The status of the host gift-giver was directly proportional to his capacity for gift-giving. The greater the gift, the greater the status of the giver. But wait! As Mary Douglas put it, there are no free gifts! Every gift given carried with it the obligation to reciprocate, often with 100% interest. Today's potlatch guest would be tomorrow's potlatch host. Potlatching thus generated rivalry between status-seekers (typically the big chiefs) as each one tried to outdo the other in their capacity to give everything away. At times these contests would escalate to the point where the distribution of property became inadequate for the expression of a chief's disregard for wealth and property. The next step would be to actually destroy property, often by burning it up. He might burn up his canoes, or his house, or the entire village. He might break his coppers and throw them in the sea. He may cut the throat of his slaves. All this he would do in full view of his guests, and usually with the complete approbation of his clan. Throughout the goal was to flatten his rival's rank and enlarge his own. The "winner" of such a contest is not just the individual potlatcher, but also the dead from whom the potlatcher claims hereditary title, as well as the living clan of the potlatcher.

Marcel Mauss first noted the underlying principles of the gift in Northwest Coast Potlatch and then discovered its occurrence in varying forms at diverse locations, including Malaysia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Africa, North America, ancient Rome, as well as the ancient Indo-European world. Because of the rivalrous and ecstatic nature of potlatch, what Benedict thought of as the Dionysian ethos, Mauss referred to Potlatch as an "agonistic" form of the gift economy. His general characterization of the gift economy is as a "system of total services." He describes this system as:

"First it is not individuals, but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other. The contracting parties are legal entities: clans, tribes, and families who confront and oppose one another either in groups who meet face to face in one spot, or through their chiefs, or in both these ways at once. Moreover, what they exchange is not solely property and wealth, movable and immovable goods, and things economically useful. In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract."

The central question posed by Mauss is this: “What rule of legality and self-interest [in a gift economy]...compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?”

What Mauss demonstrates and Bataille greatly amplifies is that the essence of this contract holds that things contain an animated force, and that this force produces both social solidarity as well as the obligation to reciprocate. The Maori word for it is *Hau*, or the spirit of the thing given. Tamati Ranaipiri, a Maori, explained the nature of the *Hau*:

“Let us suppose that you possess a certain article (taonga) and that you give me this article. You give it to me without setting a price on it. We strike no bargain about it. Now, I give this article to a third person who, after a certain lapse of time, decides to give me something as payment in return (utu). He makes a present to me of something (Taonga). Now, this Taonga that he gives me is the spirit (Hau) of the Taonga that I had received from you and given to him. The Taonga that I received for the Taonga (which came from you) must be returned to you. It would not be fair (tika) on my part to keep these Taonga for myself, whether they were desirable (rawe) or undesirable (kino). I must give them to you because they are a Hau of the Taonga that you gave me. If I kept this other Taonga for myself, serious harm might befall me, even death. This is the nature of the Hau, the Hau of personal property, the Hau of the Taonga, the Hau of the forest.”

Gift Economy vs Modern Economy

For the longest time, economic evolution was thought of as a single one-way progression from barter to sale and money, and lastly evolving into credit. Those societies that did not display any of these characteristics were thought of as backward, simple, and without any kind of market. However, the discovery of gift economies calls this entire trajectory into question. For gift economies are largely devoid of barter or sale, yet they operate on a complex credit system. Furthermore they definitely operate within a market setting. It is the rules of exchange that are different. Finally, the incentives of self-interest are fully operational in gift economies. The absolute sovereignty of the individual self is maintained in a system that can only be called communal.

It is precisely the *Hau* that modern economics cannot recognize, and this is the critical difference between the two systems. The *Hau*, is not just a superstitious fancy, but is in fact an ecological ethic of total interrelatedness which is supported by contemporary physics and biology, most notably in

Chaos theory, with its well-known statement that the fluttering of a butterfly's wings in China today will affect the weather over Seattle next week. Perhaps the *Hau* is best expressed through Bataille's theory of General Economy. This theory starts from a general perspective: how is life possible? Is it possible to speak of the flow of living matter in general? Bataille explains that "A movement is produced on the surface of the globe that results from the circulation of energy at this point in the universe." The connection with economics, is that "the economic activity of men appropriates this movement, making use of the resulting possibilities for certain ends." The problem, especially for modern economics, is that this movement has a pattern and laws of which the men who appropriate it are unacquainted.

This movement is the animating force, what Dylan Thomas called "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower." Bataille's basic observation is that all organisms are provided with more energy than they need to stay alive. This surplus of energy (which he terms wealth) can be used for the growth of the organism, or system. If the system can no longer grow, or if the surplus cannot be absorbed into the growth, it must be destroyed, spent and lost, one way or another, willingly or unwillingly, and entirely without profit. This is what is willingly and lavishly done in potlatch. While this might seem straightforward enough, it is anathema to classical economic theories such as those that drive modern economies. It is not rational. It is paradoxical, but so is life.

In Bataille's theory, life on Earth is first and foremost characterized by the superabundance of energy freely given to it by the Sun. This superabundance carries over into the everyday activities of humans. The problem of life then is not that of scarcity, but of excess. Organisms have had to evolve mechanisms for squandering and destroying this excess, this accursed share. These are mechanisms of luxury. Eating, death and sexual reproduction constitute the three luxuries of nature. As any cellular biologist can tell you, none of these three luxuries are necessary for there to be life.

If excess is a basic biological factor, then we have to deal with it one way or another. There appear to be two basic responses that humans have made: either reciprocating the excess, by adapting their lifestyles to the condition of luxurious exuberance, or by somehow eliminating the conditions of continual excess.

The conquest of nature that was attempted in North America (sixteenth century up to present) by the nascent modern economies can be seen as one long attempt at erasing such excess. In this case it was the excess of *wilderness*, as well as those people who were integrated in this excess, with their "insane exuberances of generosity" that were the potlatches, to say nothing of the hundreds of other "pagan" practices throughout the continent.

Such practices were generally thought of by the missionaries and the various governments as preventive of acquiring “civilization.” They were probably right. Clastres demonstrated that stateless societies generally deployed built-in sociocultural mechanisms that prevented the development of coercive forces such as needed for the existence of the State.

In contrast, the inclusion of the *Hau* in one’s economic considerations by definition demands a reciprocal participation in a wild, luxurious exuberant world peopled by interrelating creatures that are not even always humans. For humans are not the only ones in “the flow of living matter in general.” It is no surprise that the dead play a significant, if not central, role in virtually every potlatch. Here we arrive at a different understanding of wealth (and perhaps the meaning of life), not as the force or right to continually acquire and accumulate energy, but as the ability to squander and consume its excess in a festive way. From the standpoint of modern economy, this appears insane. Yet from the standpoint of both gift economy and general economy, the endless development of productive forces (which is, after all, the goal of the modern economy) is not only mad, it is doomed. It does not fully reckon with the energy it seeks to appropriate, and will likely be consumed by it as a result.

In the modern economy, surplus value (*i.e.*, energy) is not publicly squandered in a collective festival or sacrifice in which all take part. It is instead accumulated by the small number of people who constitute the upper classes. This accumulation is then appropriated for further development of productive forces, which in turn generate ever greater amounts of surplus, and for which a further accumulation is attempted. When these attempts fail, as they constantly do today, the pressures of the surplus begin to burst the seams of the system. At those times, there is nothing to enhance solidarity. There is no *Hau*. There are only armies of police to hold together a society bereft of any other commonly-held self-interests. The society undergoes what it could otherwise bring about in a better way. Thus, instead of regular communal destructions of property (*e.g.*, burning down the schools every five years), we have international wars.

The history of the State, or “civilization,” is the history of such accumulation. Even Henry Kissinger has been able to see that “every civilization that has ever existed has ultimately collapsed.” Could it be that the reason is because these societies closed their eyes and souls to the excess of nature and in so doing somehow hoped to overcome it?

The Gift-Exchange at Christmas

It is not too gross a generalization to say that the gift-exchange at Christmas is a faint, schizoid echo of those human epochs when the total system of

social, cultural and economic exchanges took the form of gift-exchanges. As such it is something of a *mockery* of what the gift is all about. It is small wonder that suicides occur with greater frequency during Christmas. It is generally at this time when people are culturally compelled to make some kind of attempt at human intimacy, some kind of effort to express or feel the interrelatedness between people. But because of the nature of human interactions in the context of modern economies which prevail during the rest of the year — these efforts are usually consigned to either the paltry exchange of commodities, or the rather painful realization that there is very little intimacy possible in the given circumstances. People may mean well when they engage in reciprocal gift exchanges at this time, but all they are really exchanging are images of reciprocity.

Rioting and Looting as a Return to Our Potlatch Roots

Americans today generally think the intentional destruction of property is a bad thing. When rioters and looters take to the streets, people generally agree that society is breaking down. Those people caught rioting and looting get put in prison. Laws are made against such actions. The same goes for the rest of the modern world. Yet within the context of gift economies like potlatch, such actions were not only held in high regard, they enhanced social solidarity. Although the contexts in which potlatching went on are very different from the context in which the L.A. riots of 1992 took place, there is a common ground. That ground is the necessity to squander the surplus. In one case the forcing pressure is custom, in the other it is injustice. The point is that they are both pressures demanding the destruction of property through its redistribution or outright elimination. This pressure will make itself felt one way or another.

With the knowledge of the gift and the accursed share, it seems reasonable that the gift economy is a far more preferable mechanism for our material activities. It offers the advantages of individual autonomy, a flexible market for exchange, but without all the problems that come with commodities, like work. Going from here to there will certainly be tricky, but I suggest we start with a lesson from the Kwakiutl. The big chief is not made so by force, nor by right. He is made by rank and status, which he acquires through a demonstrated superior disregard for material wealth. On those grounds I suggest that the twelve-thousand or so people who were arrested for rioting, and especially looting, be made into potlatch chiefs. Furthermore, I suggest that an obligation to reciprocate is incumbent upon the rest of us. The South-Central potlatchers threw a grand maxwa. Who will throw the next potlatch?

A Game for the Nineties: ASE

It is 1993 and the general observation that the practice of people submitting to work on a daily normalized basis is the primary motor reproducing the daily phenomena of society continues to be all too accurate.

Part of these phenomena are the ideologies and thinking about the process of social reproduction — the *reflecting* on the doing. Controlling these reflections through the division and specialization of knowledge has had a regulating effect determining what is and what is not suitable for framing as germane questions. An example of the latter is the question of what comes after the commerce-state-class form of power; or, what comes after the rule of law? While these two questions may be on the tongues of many an anti-authoritarian, from the point of view of “maintaining order,” these questions are best rendered irrelevant. This determination of relevance — in its turn — maintains the ongoing submission to the miserable confines of rank and work, not unlike the way the blinders keep a poor horse in a dumb race.

Round and Round

The Marxist discourse generally dismissed ideology as a *peripheral*, a “super-structural” aspect of social phenomena. Subsequent critiques of Marx, notably those of the Frankfurt school and the situationists, recognized a more essential function of ideology. Ideas and actions are never separate. Dreaming and thinking are also actions. Arranging dreams and thoughts into systems of ideas or visions is another form of action. They are actions that are different from the “physical” action of the deed. An interrelation nevertheless obtains between them. It is a murky yet potent juxtaposition of a binary pair of opposites. It was when Adorno tried to elucidate it, and it is even more so today.

Social life in the “first world” today is largely based on the ironic fear of the violence that its very own class structures produce. The fantasy of races continues as a central explanation of violence. The rhetoric of racial types continues as a central explanation of violence. The concept of racial types is a categorical arrangement of difference that is especially suited, if not custom-made, for the divisions necessary to class structures. The idea here is that all structures have some kind of division. Not all societies have structures, mind you. Ours still does. Think of a house. What holds up the second floor? It is usually some sort of support wall, *i.e.* a division. In a class structure there are several divisions. In terms of power, there is the primary division of those that have and them that do not. The racial type is especially useful here for identification purposes.

History, such as we know it, is the special device for maintaining the current divisions, and thus helps to produce the determination of relevance. It is especially useful as examples to be cited in the present for the purposes of upholding this or that body of law. The familiar theme is as follows: "You want to know what happens when the law breaks down? Well, look at history." It is often violent. But that is not all it is. History is also always partial, always incomplete. It tends to leave out the best parts of the human story — *those parts where people got away*.

History is directly linked to law. When law breaks down, or when law never existed, is when the writing of history — the documentation of activity — is absent or simply never was. That does not mean there is no activity. It does not mean that it leaves no traces behind — it does. But for us flatlanders trained in obedience and conformity to the rule of law, those traces are more problematic than explanatory. Just like the brightness of a full moon blots out the stars around it, so too does the spectacular glow of our categories of thought — our epistemic machines — block the full view of the other epistemological figures: the *heteroclitics*. There are blinders on our imaginations. It is said that if we remove them, the greater blindness may wreck our eyes with wonder. Is that really so bad?

Aboriginal Lessons

For example, there have been found at many archaeological sites in the Northeastern Woodlands of North America such traces as to indicate the presence of an extensive and quick network of exchange among indigenous people here, just prior to the contact period (ca. 1600 a.d.), and going back at least two centuries. The nature of this network continues to elude these scholars laboring under today's social scientific frameworks of inquiry. In these woodlands, with these people, there was no commodification, there were no profits, and no property. These are the forces that animate modern networks of commerce. There are entire libraries boasting of the collective understanding of these three forces. But when confronted with the question of what the motor driving woodlands exchange was, the specialists generally shrug their shoulders and quickly move along. Or if they try, they can only cast their answer in terms that make sense in their *a priori* epistemic assumptions, e.g. they were pre-capitalist: they were on their way to establishing statist institutions but got interrupted by their collision with Europe. Such assumptions are still widely held, and for good reason — they emphasize the class structures currently in place. The other idea — that woodlands exchange was driven by a different kind of motor that cannot be explained within first world epistemic frameworks — emphasizes reciprocity, and as such, must naturally be omitted from relevance.

How to Play

I now propose a new form of praxis, and one that is already beginning to be engaged spontaneously and diversely. Adopting Bakunin's basic "revolutionary negation," that the urge to: destroy is always already a creative urge; along with Proudhon's dicta "property is theft" and incorporating Durkheim's idea of the conscience collective (*i.e.*, that complex of socio — cultural behavioral codes that precede and inform the human that is born into it), I will outline a game of historical/ideological disruption for anti-authoritarians, to be played in those interludes between deeds.

The object of this game, then, is to apply an emancipatory epistemology (free-frame thinking, or as Feyerabend puts it "anything goes") to the conscience collective through its venues of daily life. In particular the venue of historical reference that both legal and political systems depend on is a particularly febrile location favoring successful play. But so is a St. Patrick's Day parade (bring back the snakes), or a night of playful mischief in the streets. Alas, so too is the workplace.

Epistemology is the question about how knowledge is formed or produced. How do we know things? How do we explain that the knowledge of things changes? Virtually every statement involves a number of given assumptions. How do particular assumptions come to be accepted as given? Answering these questions involves digging into issues and forces rather primary but not readily apparent. Digging into them with Bakunin's revolutionary negation can be highly combustible, and just as satisfying.

Let's call this game Applied Systematic Entropy (ASE). Assume your lived experience is a temporary locus through which many diverse historical forces pass and collide, more or less randomly or at the behest of some strange gods, violently or non-violently. The movement of these forces constitutes the historical process. It is the active component of the conscience collective. Let's call this process a river. And into this river are innumerable other loci of experience from time immemorial that alter the flow of the river in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Your move is to place an altered locus into the river and observe the effects it makes (Does it make enticing ripples? Does it make a huge jam, the kind that breaks bridges?). In choosing what locus to place where, you are guided by one rule — *anything goes*. That is it. Taking notes is a good idea. A robust anti-history will confound and evoke. It might not explain anything at all. Remember that the removal of the blinders, Blake's "bursting the mind-forg'd manacles," is the goal. Sometimes explanations are not necessary to achieve this.

Then the next player goes. The game continues until, as a result of the action between the placement of loci and the reaction of the river, either a

general insurrection breaks out, or the ramparts of the sacred go flying into heaps of rubble, or a significant ideological disrupture occurs. At that time, play is suspended and the game is over. A new game starts after the festivities have subsided, and the players are so inclined, comfortably situated amongst the ruins of the former epoch.

This unusual game has the architectural advantage of a framework for action that does away with the need for the kinds of unfortunate Christian appeals to morality and goodness that so many past dreamers have depended on for their zeal and mania. It accommodates devils as well as angels. All you need for this game is some basic acquaintance with your own desires and a taste for heresy.

As a result of this emancipated framework, one is freed up from the highly constrained *activism* typical of U.S. dissent. For example, demonstrations and marches have generally taken place under the assumption that direct confrontation will pressure the government into acting in a more ethical or moral way. When playing ASE, one can operate under different assumptions, such as that covert sabotage might trigger a series of forces that break up the government, as well as giving you an immediate kick. Or that covert sabotage might start an ongoing public autonomous discourse. Because in ASE the epistemological assumptions are just game pieces, as opposed to unquestioned moral foundations, they are much less precious and much more flexible. There is more room for spontaneous effects and mutant development. This is also what makes it dangerous. ASE rides right through that strait where the Charybdis of fascism waits on one side, while the Scylla of insipid passivity lurks on the other. Anything can happen when anything goes. The whole thing hinges on the player's egoism, not the constraint of the rule of laws.

In the modern and post-modern world we can make the observation that many gloomy ideological clouds of capital and Christianity regularly cover its entire surface, albeit patchy in lots of places. Removing this cloud through a total critique has proven impractical. Leviathan lingers on. One alternative strategy that presents itself today is that of locally rending a part of this cloud into strange and wondrous contours that have an effect of systemic disrupture. I have proposed Applied Systemic Entropy (ASE) as a river-game that may serve this other strategy. I contend that this game is already being played under different names and in diverse circumstances.

The gamble of ASE is this: if you lose, you will make the cloud cover so heavy you cannot move; or you may yourself be reified by the gloom. You might start a war.

But if you win, you get away — to play another day.

What is a Race?

*“you got a dog race
you got a horse race
you got a human race;
but this is a rat race...”*

— Bob Marley

Race is a fiction. That does not preclude people from acting as if it were fact. Race is palpable, you can feel it on the streets and in the country. You can see its traces in everyone’s faces. Oh, it is real alright. But does it not feel funny some times? Do you ever find yourself pausing to wonder how it is you go about classifying other people? Already I’m suggesting the initial classification: people other than...what? You? Or me? How did we get that way?

With exceptions, everywhere everyday people go about their lives as if this difference called race is somehow real. What is here suggested is that this acceptance of the propositions of race simultaneously serves as the basic constituent of its virtual reality. What the underlying concepts of race actually consist of is another story altogether. This latter story tells the tale of a mirage, a smokescreen of ostensible truths that conceal an entirely different cluster of interests. Do not look too closely at the concepts of race, for they will shatter under scrutiny. Which is exactly the point. The big dreams of the eighteenth century European theorists, collectively known as the Enlightenment, were to liberate us from such mirages. The rigorous scrutiny provided by Enlightenment theory was going to liberate us from every-thing-slavery, despotism, injustice, feeble minded people and above all, from myth, mysticism, and enchantment. Its great mistake-its black hole-was that it could not recognize itself. It could not tell its own nature. It could not tell that it was itself a myth. It was a serious understatement of (fuck you, Joseph Campbell!) the power of myth. This mistake has proven key to the unfolding of global history in the last two centuries. We have literally been paying the price ever since.

The Biological Concept of Race

“Look and see whether there is anything common to all, and if we do that we will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.”

— Wittgenstein

The basic theory employed in the race concept is the theory of type. The races of humanity constituted types of *Homo sapiens*. In other words, a type is a sub-classification of a larger classification. Classifications have to be based on something. For instance, the primary biological division classification known as Kingdom is based on observed differences between plants and animals. The classifications of both *Homo* and *Sapiens* are based on measurements of brain capacity and tooth size. So what then is a racial type based on? Take a wild guess.

Skin color is the primary unit upon which type has been based. It, in turn, refers to the phenotype, *i.e.* the physical appearance of the individual. The essential difference between this unit, and say the unit upon which the classification Subphylum Vertebrata is based (the presence or absence of a spinal cord) is not just a matter of time (Subphylum Vertebrata addressing a change that took place over millions of years, whereas skin color can change in a single generation). More importantly it is a difference between variation and evolution. Evolutionary changes are irreversible. Variation, on the other hand, is much more malleable. Evolutionary changes usually can be reasonably well-fitted into a category, whereas variation does not fit very well at all. The problem is this: How do you arrange variation into types when the process of variation itself invariably undoes every racial type. It comes down to the ability to fuck and breed. All it takes are two people from different 'races' coming together and producing a baby to destroy the type. Interspecies sex will never result in offspring. However, inter-racial sex will. Aborigines, Jews, Blacks, Wasps (I mean W.A.S.P.s), et al, are all possessed of the ability to fruitfully copulate with each other, regardless of the doubts each of these may have about the other.

The Cultural Concept of Race

Skin color is but one characteristic out of many that is available for use in a system of differentiation. My hunch is that pointing out the differences between your group and their group has been a very common practice amongst humans throughout history, and throughout a considerable amount of prehistory as well. It may be an indicator of alienation, but it is just as much if not more likely an indicator of a desire to distinguish and differentiate amongst your fellows and fellaheen. A free people will always think of themselves as different from those they perceive not to be free. Skin color is an easy way to identify one group from another. It makes sense in a territorial kind of way. The two opposing teams wear different colors, or play shirts and skins. In New York City, the common gang practice is to match the colors of the caps on the crack vials they sell with the colors of the gang. Just so, in New York City demos, the police generally send in a lot of undercover cops into the throngs and "maintain order." They can be more effective because they

are less identifiable (although a second glance is usually enough to tell). They are at those times without their color. Differentiation and status are perhaps universal social desires. Race may, in the final analysis, be described as the pouring of these desires through the filter of market-based economics that are guided by Enlightenment theories. And like everything else that gets poured through there, it gets nasty.

The objective rational truth that gets hauled out in defense of is just as much a component of one myth as is the muskrat who swims down to the bottom of the sea to bring up some earth to plant on turtle's back a component of another. Everyday life, even in post-modern societies, does not function according to a set of codes established upon objective facts; at least, not entirely. A lot of what one does when one negotiates the quotidian (*e.g.*, in New York or Des Moines) is active myth-interpretation, for in the end, one has to forget much in order to get anything done. Myths are stories that are comparably much more practical for integrating experience than are the raw data of biology. Were people to really pause and consider the reasoned basis for their views on race they would be thrown into a conundrum. Inevitably they would become less productive employees, for they would be compelled of their own trajectory to contemplate the reasoned basis of their society, a reflective activity that has always threatened the status quo with its revelations and subsequent disrapture. The myth of objective truth is the myth of the culture that sought the conquest of nature. It functions like a good myth ought to: it sufficiently explains the contemporary society in a favorable way that encourages an ongoing compliance with its rules and constraints. And just like a good myth, it conceals its mythical nature in a veil of truth. How very magical.

“Outwitting the State” Takes a Different Kind of Power

Outwitting the State by Peter Shalnik,

vol.7 of *Political Anthropology* series

Transaction Publishers, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. 08903, 1989

172pp. \$24.95 hardcover. [A review and analysis]

One of the most tenacious of contexts within which thinking about society takes place is the context of social revolution; the context that conceives of human society as some kind of organism that evolves, just as human bodies are known to have evolved from other kinds of primates, and ultimately from fish-like creatures. This idea, that society, *i.e.* human activity, evolves over lifetimes is a most powerful analogy and is poetically gripping. It is perhaps the most poignant product of a positivistic science of man. But it is also a fantasy. More specifically, it is the creation myth of the society of industrial capitalism. By telling and re-telling this myth, the society is by turn justified, criticized, eulogized, and finally resigned to or else wholeheartedly embraced. Those outcasts who don't fit in to this myth are usually blotted out.

In *Outwitting the State*, this evolutionist myth is largely renounced in the light of eight case-studies which examine various forms of social organization that *in the myth*, are forerunners of the modern state; but in reality are fundamentally contradicting the state and not simply pre-dating it. In other words, what is being said here is that tribal social organizations, such as 'chiefdoms' and kin-based clans, are *not* only not the ancestors of the modern state, but that they aren't even related. The state must look elsewhere for its heritage. In this light, the state is historically less the inevitable accumulation of some kind of quasi-mystical process of evolution, and much more the occasional aberration intruding upon thousands of years of otherwise unalienated human interactions — which by no means were entirely libertarian or lovey-dovey (there is plenty of intrigue and violence, though arguably less so than today). The point is that none did/does not need a license to kill, nor a permit to love. There are no registration forms, no legal precedence, no laws to speak of beyond what you and yours say is right and wrong. As the great eighteenth century American vagabond Henry Tufts wrote: "I far prefer a savage life, to gloomy cares or vexing strife." The modern state that currently encircles the entire planet is an aberration that appears to be here to stay, at least until everything else is gone, devoured in its maw as it were. Yet if these case-studies are any evidence, they indicate that the state has so far been unable to entirely control the world it presumes to own. These are not tales of revolution. Some are more, some are less subversive than that. These accounts of outwitting the state have to do with practical, cultural and ethnic motivations rather than ideological, or philosophical rationales. Neither the Kreisha Bedouins (Jordan) nor the Ponapean chieftains

(Micronesia) are interested in spreading revolution; They are instead looking to claim for themselves as much autonomy as they can in the face of a stronger power — that of the modern State.

Particularly in the more developed regions, *i.e.* Europe, North America, and western Asia, the logic of the state forms the bedrock of the prevailing world views. Clastres, in *Society against the State*, examined the ways in which other societies resisted such logic, and how *their* world views had built-in guards against the development of absolute hierarchical relations of power. The societies he studied were ones that had not as yet had the state imposed on them from without. *Outwitting the State* looks at some of these other kinds of societies, as they are now, after having had the state imposed on them for 50–300 years. What emerges is the generalization that throughout the world are various indigenous forms of social organization that continue to struggle against the modern state. They are not always so successful, and none of them succeed in entirely escaping the pressures of the state. Yet some of them do manage to establish grounds upon which they can retain their culture and their autonomy, at least temporarily.

The last study in this volume especially clarifies this general situation. It concerns two entirely different indigenous forms of social organization. They are the Nanumba and the Konkomba of the Nanun (Ghana). While the Nanumba are people whose organization consists of a centralized hierarchical polity, the Konkomba are described by anthropologists as “acephalous tribesmen” (leaderless, communal). These two ethnic groups came into violent conflict with each other in 1981, largely owing to arbitrary border shifts effected by the state of Ghana. After a few years, both the Nanumba and the Konkomba came to realize they had more in common with each other than either had with the state. They’ve since become allies against the alien modern form.

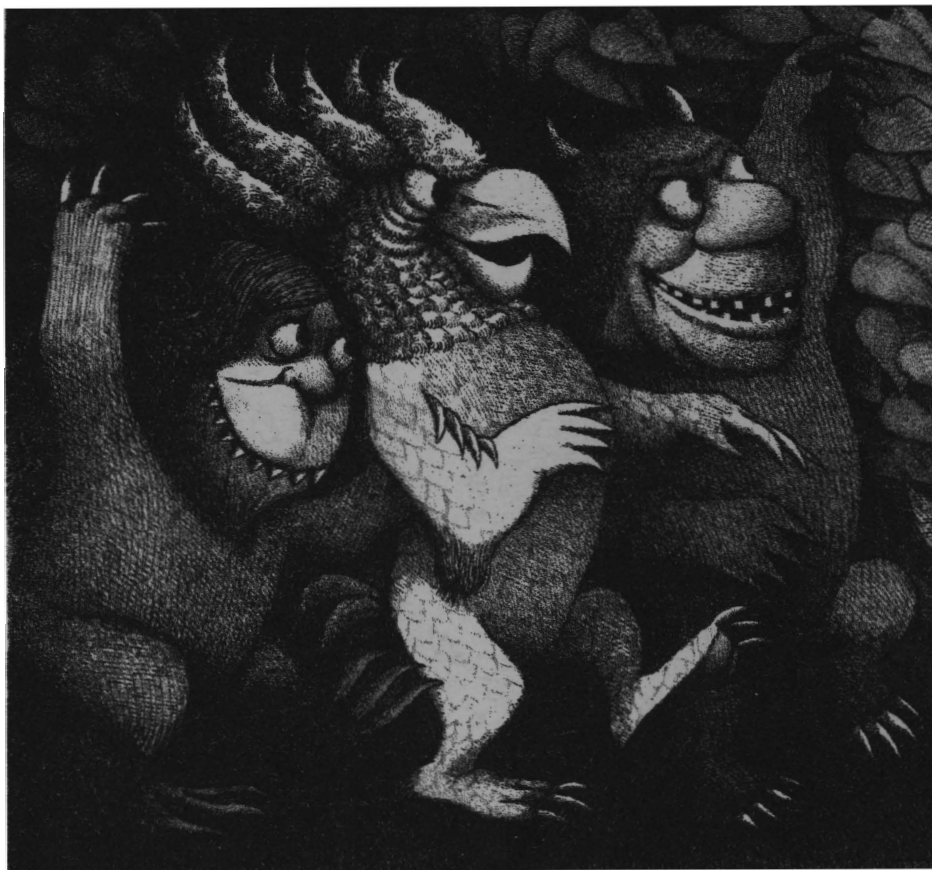
What makes the indigenous hierarchy of the Nanumba different from the absolute hierarchy of the state is that the Nanumba polity was local, without abstract law, was not production based (the Nanumba economy was subsistence farming and had no way of forcing people to work). Whatever authority the Nanumba chief has is directly related to his ability to convince with words, for there are no police in Nanun. Or there weren’t any prior to the arrival of the state. It is thus reasonable to say that the hierarchy of the Nanumba chieftaincy is fundamentally different from the hierarchy of the state, in that the former is comforting (in this case, to the people of Nanun), while the latter is oppressive. Local authority is different from expansive power. The former does not evolve into the latter. In fact, it is a simple thing to trace the origins of the state for the Nanumba. It begins on November 30; 1896 and is imported by German colonialists who conquer them, and make them work.

Another case study, on the Russian Old Believers (*raskol'niki*) who currently live in Alberta, Canada, under (what they believe to be) the shadow of the antichrist (which is more or less tantamount to the modern state) is of special note. The Old Believers value very highly their *vol'nost'* (freedom). Indeed, it is in order to retain their *vol'nost'* that the Old Believers have migrated from place to place, always living on the edge of a nation-state until that state became too imposing with its controls and bureaucracy. As the title of this article suggests, "there is always somewhere to go." But *vol'nost'* specifically refers to freedom of action. According to Scheffel, as much as the Old Believers value their *vol'nost'*, just so do they abhor *vol'nodumstvo* (freethinking). The modern state has it the other way around. Here is permitted all the *vol'hodumstvo* you can eat, and forbidden is any of this *vol'nost'*. This begs the question of what kind of *vol'nodumstvo* is possible in a society bereft of *vol'nost'*.

In addition to the Nanumba and Konkomba, Old Believers, Ponapean chieftainships and Kreisha Bedouins, there are studies of the Cree Indians (James Bay, Canada), the indigenous polities of Pahang and Kelantan (Malaya), and of Maradi (Niger), as well as the coastal sultanates and inland chiefdoms on Borneo.

This is recommended reading for all nomads and 'bolo builders.

We never met Neil Keating, but in the early 1990's he was a regular writer for *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* and made several provocative contributions to the early development of post-left anarchist thought. Somewhere along the way he either disengaged or died (or maybe he landed a teaching job somewhere—which is about as animated as death!), so we decided to put together this “best of” sampler for those who were still in diapers during Neil's heyday. This collection is NOT for the politically-correct!



ENEMY COMBATANT PUBLICATIONS

ASK WITH, MAINE